

7 February 1989

Notes on Blight and Welch, On the Brink

1. How high was the danger of nuclear war during the crisis, and from what did it derive?

Opening sentence of McGeorge Bundy's foreward refers to "nuclear danger." Liner note by Strobe Talbott begins: "There is no doubt that the Cuban missile crisis was the closest that the United States and the Soviet Union have ever come to the brink of war." (Consider the scorn poured on Dulles for this phrase, in 1956--referring to a whole set of other incidents--by some of the very participants in this crisis: Nitze, Acheson...)

First back cover comment, by Richard Rhodes: "...the closest the world ever came to nuclear war."

Why, and in what sense, "closest"? How close? Was it a "nuclear crisis" at all?

How much of this sense of danger derives from false public impressions: 1) the sense that the installation could only be understood as preparation for a Soviet first strike, perhaps soon (fostered by JFK speech); 2) belief that it would make a Soviet first strike vastly more feasible, tempting, threatening; 3) belief that Castro might control the missiles, unpredictably; 4) expectation that any US non-nuclear attack on Cuba, or blockade incident, would likely lead to Soviet nuclear retaliation, perhaps all-out (Bertrand Russell, Szilard?); 5) related assumption that US deterrence was very unstable, that Soviets would be quick to retaliate to any pressure by nuclear first strike?

A basis for fear: both sides were taking actions that were predictably highly provocative to the other. And Khrushchev's were seen by Americans--what about perceptions elsewhere--as the more menacing and illegitimate. Though in legal terms, and in terms of a parity of rights and of American precedence, the Soviet actions were perfectly legal and equivalent to earlier American ones. (However, the secrecy of the Soviet actions and US assertions that the Soviets had been deceptive gave them a guilty and ominous look).

Note that mis-estimates of the risk of particular courses, of the probability of certain actions or responses by the adversary or allies, or of risk of the confrontation as a whole, whether over-estimates or under-estimates, could either raise the overall risk, or lower it! Likewise, biases in the estimate of risk, in either direction.

I.e., a high estimate (biased, or exaggerated: or well-founded) of a high could dispose one either to caution, rejection

of a risky course or a search for alternatives, or to preemptive action as a lesser evil... Confidence that the opponent will not act violently no matter what one does (Taylor, p. 138) could lead to very aggressive actions oneself; or to the lack of a feeling of threat, hence to lack of need to act violently.

How would a surprise attack (or, one with warning; or even after October 27 ultimatum) have differed from a limited preventive war, or preventive attack? How would it have differed from the Israeli attack on the Iraqi reactor? How can we say that US leaders never came close to considering seriously a preventive war when our rationale for this attack was a (furtive) Soviet attempt suddenly and unilaterally to change "the balance of power"? Why wouldn't this rationale apply equally well to a sudden, secret buildup of ICBMs in the Soviet Union? (Or China).

For the doves, the real reason for the "crisis" or "problem" was the commitment that JFK had made publicly, that we would take action if there was a buildup of offensive weapons (without having, at the time, given a rationale for why we would regard this so seriously; the real reason having been that the Republicans wanted us to invade anyway, and to stop the Soviet aid, and that this tough talk was a substitute for acting more aggressively in September). I.e., this was no indication of how we would have behaved and planned in the event of a Soviet buildup, against which we had made no such public threats.

Nevertheless, the publicly-offered rationale was that of the need for a preventive attack, if the objectionable missiles were not removed by the Soviets (with no consideration of an "arms control" approach in which both sides made concessions and approached stability by removing or averting comparable threatening elements) (such an approach would have implied diplomatic parity; and as the Soviets see it, the US considered such an admission only after the Soviets had bought military parity. Are they wrong, in their causal inference? Was it worth it?

Chomsky sees such US demands as piracy, lawless vigilantism. Most members of the elite see it as being a Free World policeman, or, more privately, exercising the responsibilities (and rights) of being a Great Power (certainly, in our "traditional sphere") and of being the Good Guys, representing Light against the forces of Darkness (Nixon, Reagan), with a double standard more or less explicitly applying to the means allowable to the two sides (i.e., it is all right, being well intended, serving good, and being necessary, for us to make threats and attacks and demands that are wrong when the Soviets do what appears to be the same).

As Chomsky does point out, the Soviets see it much the same way, reversed; except that in external relations, they were then

trying to establish a global symmetry, not to maintain or achieve a superior status.

McN admits that a US president--not Kennedy, not with McN to advise him?--might impulsively, in a crisis, have ordered preemption if he feared that the Soviets were about to strike, in order to limit damage (a goal McN gave credence to at least into 1964, if not later). Surely this was more likely for Kennedy in 1962 than later, despite Kennedy's caution, given the capabilities on both sides. Moreover, McN says that he could imagine a real possibility of Soviet preemption--in view of the appearance of the alert that SAC had actually instituted--and worried about this during the crisis. (This is news; he admits that the opposite impression might have prevailed).

Given this, did not the alert offer real risks? What else could possibly have triggered Soviet attack (about which, to repeat, McN actually worried: perhaps realistically, though I would not have said so at the time). In the event, however, the Soviets lay very low, walked very cautiously, did not go on alert at all, as Dave Burchinal probably expected. Thus, the SAC alert did reduce the risks of nuclear war through Soviet preemption, false alarm, or unauthorized action.

However, suppose the Soviets had behaved otherwise, understandably, and gone on a high alert (if they were at all capable of this). This would have caused apprehension, of a sort, at SAC and NORAD; and McNamara, apparently, was a SecDef who would not have felt that Soviet preemption--totally irrational though it would have been--was out of the question, totally implausible under the crisis circumstances. Suppose there had been, in addition, indications that Soviet preemption--perhaps out of very plausible fear of US preemption or preventive attack (e.g., to accompany US attack on Cuba, in expectation, which did exist, of a strong Soviet response, and to forestall Soviet attainment of a higher level of alert).

What would McNamara have advised the President? Would he really want to wait till bombs had exploded on the US? Would he not at least entertain discussion of preemption? Would he not have taken this thought significantly more seriously than he would have in, say, 1967? And if not: would he believe that this would be equally true of any President and of "sane" Secretaries of Defense other than himself, e.g., Nitze, Dillon, Taylor, Weinberger, Laird (who called for superiority), etc.? I.e., that damage-limiting on the scale available in 1962 would offer no incentive to preempt (and thus put pressure on the Soviets to preempt, if they had more capability to do so than in 1962) under conditions of Soviet readiness and of crisis like 1962 (which could have arisen in 1973, or perhaps in Syria 1983 or the Persian Gulf 1987, or over a blockade of Cuba by Haig in 1981)? (Granted, the same opportunities for damage-limiting will never

return; but if McNamara could even imagine Khrushchev in 1962 acting that impulsively (as Rusk did, too), why not later US leaders, with first-strike offering a greater differential over second-strike than was true for him?)

According to B and W, 205, "the ExComm's assessments of Soviet actions...were clearly fundamental to their assessments of the risk of nuclear war (for neither hawks nor doves in the ExComm suggested that it would have been wise or necessary for the United States to initiate nuclear war, though there, of course, some possibility that a breakdown of command and control or an accident of some kind might have resulted in an advertent use of an American nuclear weapon)."

Can it be that nowhere in this book is there acknowledgement of the possibility (or prospect, in Soviet eyes) of US first use--over Berlin, or Turkey?! Or of deliberate, Presidential preemption, except for McNamara's hypothetical mention of some President, though he denies the possibility for Cuba II (see the conflicting statements at top and bottom of p. 199)? Is this the unacknowledgeable possible route to nuclear war? Granted what McNamara reveals about his own commitments, and what he believes of the President: were these thoroughly reliable under all circumstances that might have arisen? And what if others had held these posts? (See Bobby Kennedy's comment).

What kind of "craziness, irrationality" was called for, to get nuclear weapons to explode? (e.g., as the basis for the hawks' residual fears: far from infinitesimal (207)!) Was it not of the same order as was amply exhibited among American officials on the ExComm--presumably available on both sides! (i.e., not merely hypothetical, a paranoid worry about possible Soviets).

E.g., a willingness, for limited purposes, to take actions with a 10% chance of leading to nuclear war! (Nitze). Or feeling certain (Dillon) that the other side would not be crazy enough to respond, from a position of strategic inferiority, to an attack on its forces. Or waking up to find it "interesting" still to be alive (Rusk) after endorsing the blockade; likewise (Ball and McNamara) not to be sure that they would see another Sunday, given the course they had proposed.

See the very limited, "economist's" definition of irrationality cited from Schelling, 216, which leaves out "crazy, inhumane, unreasonable" payoff functions or priorities (which may still be consistent and orderly), and perceptual and ideological bias, and crazy "models" of inference. (It emphasizes inconsistency and disorderly procedures as forms of irrationality).

2. Still missing from revelations, memories: Nitze's and Rusk's reactions (omissions in B and W interview? p. 139-40) to first news of missiles! Nitze either doesn't remember, conceals it, or

his reply is censored in B/W. "We would have to eat these; they were legal, there was precedent, there was nothing we could do."

But when President--who had not been alerted the night before (apparently, against advice of Rusk to Bundy!), so had had no time for reflection before first meetings--felt the political heat, as did RFK (memory of Cline? and Hyland?) and perhaps also felt angry at having been deceived and having made himself vulnerable with public assurances and public threats (though perhaps he had deceived himself, in large part, in interpreting deliberately ambiguous Soviet statements)--said, "The missiles have to go," that redefined the situation for Nitze and Rusk.

How reluctant were they to shift perspective? Were they happy to see the US take the risks (which Nitze remembers now as seeming very low to him--10% at the time!) (compare the range of estimates over atmospheric ignition!) so long as the President took the responsibility? But Rusk thought risks were higher; so did the President, as it happens.

Dillon says he never heard anyone question the unanimous, immediate premise that those missiles had to come out, by whatever means necessary.)165) But this was not the initial reaction of Nitze or Rusk (or, I suspect McNamara) the night before; it was laid down by the President. The failure to question it was simply the unwillingness of anyone to challenge the President's firm premise, even at these stakes.

No one--except perhaps Acheson--treated their own careers and access to the President as expendable. No one acted as I did in October 1969. No one treated any of the courses in question as having the nature Konrad Kellen described: "There are certain things that, unless you must do them, you must not do them." In law, this is like saying: Only a clearcut necessity defense can justify this. Concretely: This--normally illegal--action is justified only if it is the only way to save human lives from imminent (or otherwise sure?) harm. ✕

Violent courses, including the blockade, did not meet this test in Cuba II--though the public was at first encouraged to believe they did. Nitze and others suppress to this day information on their own initial assessments, which would reveal that they did not regard the Soviet deployment as either illegal or necessary to reverse: hence, as justifiable to reverse by violent, otherwise illegal means.

No one challenged the President's initial, impulsive assessment that the missiles were "unacceptable," and ever since, both doves and hawks have endorsed that premise (differing, in some cases importantly, on how to have achieved it). And no one said: What you are doing is so wrongheaded, immoral, dangerous, that I cannot be party to it. Still less: ...I will not keep my

✕ or K/T (me):
justified if (and if?) the alternative
is a sure, s-t loss for me."

promise of confidentiality; Congress, the public, the UN, whoever I can mobilize into effective resistance, must be alerted to what is being contemplated.

Actually, hawks seemed more likely to react this way. McCone had probably been leaking earlier to Keating (and, suspected of this, was cut out of the private Fomin-Scali dealings, and not, apparently, told of RFK's dealings with Dobrynin; nor would he have been told of the JFK-Cordier-U Thant link if that had been used).

Acheson withdrew from the proceedings when his airstrike advice was not followed. (He didn't approve of the ExComm format anyway: too large, too inclusive, especially of "moralists"). Dillon was shocked and depressed when he heard of the President's readiness to trade the Turkish missiles (as I was when I inferred it Saturday night); he might have reacted strongly if he had known at the time, which is why he wasn't told. (I went along, most reluctantly and inefficiently; but I decided never to come back to Washington).

For many of these people, being selected for the ExComm meant the apex of their careers in terms of inclusion in the circle around the President and closeness to the President on important decisions. It was "unthinkable" to them that they should sacrifice that. (Neither of these applied to Acheson).

(b) Nitze's actual estimate at the time of the risk of nuclear war: 10%, "fairly high...and I was low man in the ExComm." Others? (Blight and Welch should have asked for odds, and perceptions of others' odds.)

c) secret till 1987, still not emphasized: JFK's attitude on morning of Oct 27 (or before): willingness to trade, accept parity--even "under the (defensive, deterrent!) gun," even as a backdown from a belligerent, aggressive position that implied US superiority of strength and right, at the outset.

3. Contrary to McGeorge Bundy, and to what he presumes about me, I can live with cognitive dissonance (without reinterpreting evidence or restructuring theories so as to resolve it, prematurely or unrealistically). Thus, I can admit that Nitze, not McNamara, is right: that the strategic balance makes a difference, in various ways (including the ways the hawks think), and that first-use threats can work, and that the risk of nuclear war (Soviet escalation) was lower than the President thought it was.

And yet I can still think (like Garthoff, who put the risk still lower--too low, I would say) that the risks (which I now put higher than I thought then) were not worth taking, and that Nitze's proposals were far too reckless. (I.e., the strategic balance didn't make enough difference in this case, and the first-use threats might not work, and escalation was too risky.) I pretty much held Nitze's views at the time, except much lower sense of risk (like Garthoff); though I didn't think actual attack was necessary, or desirable.

My disagreement with McNamara or with Bundy is with their extreme position, such as Bundy's 1969 statement (Foreign Affairs) that the outcome would have been the same (US demands would have been as aggressive, threats as credible, likelihood of carrying out threats no less) if the huge strategic imbalance had been reversed. I don't think parity would have made much difference; and as Bundy says, there is a broad band of parity.

But if Soviet conventional superiority elsewhere had been accompanied by huge strategic Soviet superiority (the counterpart to our position with respect to Quemoy, or perhaps Berlin) then our conventional superiority in the Caribbean would not have encouraged us, I think, to press such outrageous, illegal, aggressive demands, or to win acceptance of them, any more than Soviets could have done so to keep missiles out of Turkey in 1962.

What vast superiority did for the US in 1962 (and in 1961, and in Quemoy, 1955 and 1958, and Korea 1953) was to make it at least slightly credible that the US would carry out a first-use threat of limited, tactical nuclear strikes "if necessary" in maintaining access to West Berlin (as General Graham said he would, even today) or in response to conflict in the Middle East stemming from Soviet strikes on Turkish missiles. Thus these Soviet counterthreats were not sufficiently credible to deter us from conventional attacks in the Caribbean, even aggressive ones (in "our own backyard").

Thus, what vast (and unmatched in the future) superiority did for us in 1962 was to (1) maintain the denial of effective military parity and hence of diplomatic parity with the Soviets, and (2) prevent the establishment of an important kind of military parity in the short run, and (3) prevent the creation of effective deterrence of US aggression against Cuba. All of these were achieved by means of warlike, illegal, aggressive military actions and threats.

What this superiority had given us in 1961 was the ability to protect West Berlin by "military" means--of a terroristic nature (nuclear first use), rather than by diplomatic and trade arrangements, as after 1971.

One can say--as I do--that the strategic balance can make a difference, can matter to the outcome of certain tactics in pursuit of certain aims--yet believe these tactics are illegitimate (immoral, too reckless, illegal) and the aims are, likewise, illegitimate and unnecessary (or, to the extent that they are legitimate and worthwhile, could be achieved by other means, to which the balance is irrelevant.

Thus, the balance--and its effect on the credibility of first-use threats--would not have been of any effect or relevance in our pursuit of legitimate foreign policy ends by legitimate, appropriate and adequate means. Where it was relevant and effective was in our pursuit of what Khrushchev accurately described as piratical behavior.

4. (Wednesday, 8 February) See (1): why was the crisis dangerous?

(a) For the first time in the postwar era (17 years old) one superpower was threatening--and preparing, both publicly and privately--imminent attack on the weapons and troops of the other.

This situation could have arisen the year earlier if Khrushchev had carried out his threat to turn control of access to Berlin over to the East Germans, and if they had then blocked access, with Soviet military support.

In the case of Berlin, the Soviet move would have violated US legal rights of access, and in doing so, have threatened the liberty of the West Berliners. In Cuba, the Soviet move was itself legal--by all norms of international law, as well as by US precedent--and would have "violated" only our big-power "rights" of illegal aggression and domination in "our sphere." (But this was predictably "provocative" of an illegal, aggressive reaction from the US, and therefore highly reckless of Khrushchev; his apparent confidence that it was safe probably rested not on an assessment that Kennedy was creditably law-abiding as that he was weak, indecisive, cowardly.)

Thus there was an imminent prospect of large, perhaps unlimited, conventional conflict between the superpowers: assuming the possibility and likelihood of "horizontal escalation" by the Soviets beyond the Caribbean. (This was expected by the intelligence community, as reflected in a SNIE, as well as by doves on the ExComm, and by the public. Only hawks, perhaps including myself, discounted this).

b) There was also a link to possible nuclear war, via Soviet responses against Berlin or Turkish missiles. (Nitze, the Berlin specialist, thought a move against Turkey more likely, though it

still made no sense; Dillon, the other civilian hawk, thought the reverse.)

Again, the burden of this escalation--to nuclear war--was on the US (not in the Caribbean, but in the event of Soviet challenges elsewhere).

From McNamara's point of view (B/W

5. Each member of the ExComm (and from what we know, the Soviets) exhibited elements of both realistic shrewdness and courage, on the one hand, and madness, ignorant stupidity, or cowardice on the other. Virtually every one expressed some judgments that seemed relatively more realistic and judicious than those of his colleagues; and others that seem sharply inconsistent or crazily detached from reality or extreme and reckless, along, in all cases, with a willingness to go along with group or Presidential decisions from which the individual radically dissented.

In virtually every case, one can reasonably infer from the record that each individual could have, in certain circumstances, initiated nuclear war--or if not that (say, in the case of McNamara) launched major war with a recognized potential for "inadvertent" escalation to nuclear war--or at least (say, Ball) have gone along with such a decision without dissociating himself, blocking or exposing it.

That is, one cannot infer (even of the doves) that any one of these individuals "could not, under any circumstances, have taken actions that he recognized as raising the risks of nuclear war." None of them was a clear, reliable circuit-breaker on the way to nuclear war, still less on the way to major non-nuclear war.

What the world should have learned from this episode was close to its most extreme, fearful fantasies: that the fate of humanity rested on a dozen men in each capital who were playing poker with others' lives as stakes: and playing it the way men usually play poker, with a lively concern for their own prestige and sense of manliness. (Strip poker risks one's own shame, exposure; this would be closer to rape poker, murder poker, where what one stakes is a willingness, presumably reluctantly, to commit crimes. In this case, the player whose bet (threat) was called would have to commit mass murder--initially non-nuclear, eventually, if the betting went high enough, nuclear--possibly combined, in the latter case, with suicide: or else, an

alternative stake, accept extreme humiliation and probably loss of power.

Both Khrushchev (who did choose the latter, over calling Kennedy's bluff--if it was bluff) and Kennedy may have preferred their own defeat and humiliation to mass killing. But not enough to stop the bidding on Saturday; and one of the random elements in this game was the possibility that subordinate elements in their respective power structures might force their hand, as began to happen.

Both the possibility of "inadvertence"--loss of control by the leaders of subordinates or allies, actions taken on the basis of misunderstanding or false information--and of reckless or destructive actions by superiors (Nye ignores this, but Rusk clearly feared it in the Soviets, and Ball and others saw the influence on US leaders, and perhaps Soviets, of wild hawks) meant that "irrational" courses were real possibilities on either side: and thus, contrary to McNamara, credible and possibly effective threats, making even nuclear weapons "usable."

The actual ending of the crisis, and the US success, does confirm the hawk estimate of the potential effectiveness of both nuclear and non-nuclear threats (and the advantage of extreme strategic superiority, over either parity or inferiority: note Dillon's statement that under present conditions of parity, his position would have been like McNamara's). But this potential and advantage rests precisely on the known and real existence of traits of "madness" in representative leaders and their advisors; such a power--with its dangers for humanity--is not limited to leaders like Hitler or Stalin, or ruling circles like the Nazis.

As Rusk both understood--and exhibited himself, both in Cuba II and later in Vietnam--the "normal," predictable, traits of men in power provide a basis for effective, credible threats of mad, irrational, wildly reckless and immoral, destructive behavior, and for realistic public apprehension that such threats will be challenged by others and may be carried out.

(on a smaller scale, see the behavior of the four participants, including myself, and the attitudes expressed, in the Kwitny panel!) (As RK says: "Men are strange.")

I said to Bundy, about his advice on Rolling Thunder: There was a strangeness to that decision (and advice). That was true of the decision-making on both sides in Cuba II. Nor were lessons learned that led to markedly more realistic and prudent behavior afterwards: Vietnam (and DomRep) followed just two years later, for the US (with the Brezhnev buildup in the SU); more recently, Reagan... (Vietnam did lead to some useful learning, but it was overcome among the elite, though not yet, entirely, in the public).

The ominous lessons to be learned (from the secret record, just now beginning to come out) from Cuba II remain pertinent: about the Political Uses of Madness (see the learning by Nixon and HAK!) and its dangers for human survival.

(See the assumptions of madness that Nitze's hypothesized dangers and opportunities rest on; and the madness of Nitze's confidence that leaders on both sides will, in fact, act rationally by his standards).

6. A rule of reason: A Rule of Unreason: Realistic Mirror Imaging of Irrationality. Any attributions of possible irrationality, impulsiveness, loss of control, unreason, that are seen as realistically possible in the opponent, should be at least hypothesized for one's own side: and vice versa.

JFK and Rusk seem to have followed this rule; they saw a problem on both sides: though they were part of the problem on the US side, not relatively to the hawks, but even in their "moderate, dovish" courses they favored or accepted, and in accepting the premise that the missiles must go.

Some forms of madness:

1) (Hawks) Mad assurance that the other side (a) acts rationally, in a predictable, reasonable way, no matter what the pressures and circumstances; (b) its leaders are in absolute control of subordinates and allies; (c) thus, it will not respond to attacks--when the balance of forces offers no reasonable hope of success (and its leaders will not be tempted by unreasonable, wishful hopes)--no matter how punishing and humiliating these might be.

(These suppositions all violate the Rule of Reason, or Unreason: none of these traits would be attributed to Americans, but Bolsheviks are supposed to be inhumanly different. (This attitude was encouraged by Nathan Leites' distillation of inspirational admonitions Bolsheviks write to or about themselves: masturbation tracts for apparatchiks.)

Thus: the US can afford to act unreasonably, destructively, illegally, immorally, arrogantly, with safety: so long as the balance of forces favors it militarily.

But then: Why did Khrushchev, in a very inferior position militarily both locally in the Caribbean and in nuclear strategic terms, make such a provocative move?

Because, the hawks say, he was betting--on plausible evidence--that Kennedy lacked the will to rely on his superiorities, to take even small risks of war. Since they had a

lot to gain if they got away with it, and saw the risk as small: they were smart to try to deploy the missiles; smart to take them out, when they saw their gamble had failed; and smart enough not to have reacted if we had hit the missiles before they took them out. (Why then did the hawks prefer airstrike, if they could have foreseen that the Soviets were cool enough to remove the missiles when they saw that Kennedy was willing to claim a right to go to war, to wage an act of war in the form of the blockade, and to make every plausible preparation for war? If the Soviets could "accept" an airstrike, why wouldn't they back down to a blockade? Why did the hawks think the blockade wasn't working, on the 26th? Didn't that worry them about their fundamental assessment? Or, if it was working, but just needed more time, why press to move on to airstrike? (Dillon says, concern that missiles were becoming operational; but were they not operational already? or thought to be?))

2) Mad willingness to follow a course of action that involved an avoidable risk of nuclear war on the level of 10%, or $1/3--1/2$, or indeed 1% (Bundy). To prolong such a risk by a day: as both Kennedy and Khrushchev chose to do on Saturday, when the risk of loss of control had been demonstrated concretely by that morning. To raise the risk by such an amount, for political ends.

3) To define the deployment of missiles to Cuba as "unacceptable," "intolerable" (see Church on the Soviet brigade in Cuba, 1979)--i.e., to commit the US to "pay any cost, accept any risk, inflict any damage" necessary to eliminate it, "by any means necessary"; and to refuse or fail to reexamine or modify this premise on reflection, as the prospective requirements mounted up. (see unconditional surrender in WWII; goals in Vietnam).

Especially, to accept the President's definition of this, when it contradicted the more reasonable intuition of Rusk and Nitze at first hearing of the missiles (surely in line with McNamara, Gilpatric, and Ball: four doves and one hawk, all the top officials of Defense and State!). They were right, non-mad: except in their subsequent acquiescence! (I.e., it had to be recognized that Khrushchev had chosen a good move, good for him, based squarely on American precedent, which the Americans could not counter except with gross illegality and great, disproportionate risk, or with major concessions to the Soviets. The only flaw was that enough Americans--starting with the President--were mad and reckless and unrestrained by law or precedent or diplomatic parity, believed that might made right, and were angry, and given a color of righteousness, by the secretive tactics Khrushchev had followed.)

4) It is mad--but "human," i.e. a normal madness of men in power--to be willing (as Kahneman and Tversky suggest) generally to define as "unacceptable" in these senses, a sure, short-run

humiliation, failure, defeat, posing loss of power and office or of leadership in an Administration or an alliance, or threatening the coherence, morale, integrity of a group or alliance: preferring instead, war, or generally, great (disproportionate--by any other's standards) risks of catastrophe, even of nuclear war.

(Both JFK and Khrushchev showed an ultimate non-madness, in their willingness to contemplate or accept a humiliating backdown rather than carry out their threats of war. Yet each of them, as mentioned above, postponed that backdown for at least a day as of Saturday morning, 27 October, prolonging a significant risk of a loss of control that would lower their chances to avert war: postponed it, truly, long enough that war might really have occurred, given possible, even probable, additional events not subject to their control (Castro's shooting down more reconnaissance planes).

Moreover, Kennedy kept his own sanity a super-secret from most of his own ExComm, for fear that it would leak to the hawks and thence to the military and Congress and public and discredit him or cause effective revolt. (Note my own emotional reaction, and Dillon's; and the actual mood in the Pentagon even after the victory). In the country of the mad, the sane man is in danger.

5) Even if the Soviets had not reacted elsewhere: the hawks madly underestimated (1) the prospect that an American airstrike would have to be, or would be, followed by invasion of Cuba (the same blindness occurred two years later in Vietnam); (2) the actual costs and prospects of a war in Cuba (much less realistically estimated than in Vietnam, 1965). (Dillon feared the latter, and Taylor too--as in Vietnam--yet, as in Vietnam, he favored the airstrike).

6) (a form of madness): Where the ideological paradigm defines a certain, short-run outcome as a humiliating and costly failure; but where it can be averted only by a course with high risks of absolute catastrophe; the male, organized power system fails to reexamine the ideological premises, to attempt to "re-frame" the perceptions, to reconsider the paradigm or entertain competing paradigms: or to challenge authority. ("There is no time for that; this is not the time...for sophomoric bull sessions, considerations of 'morality' (Nitze)

This leaves it to the Authority himself to do so, if able; Kennedy alone, on the 27th and apparently earlier, entertains such notions (of accepting a new parity of status and entitlement with the Soviets, of willingness to negotiate and trade; but no one joins him, he is argued down, led away from heresy, though he secretly determines to reconsider on the next day. Likewise, perhaps, Stevenson: who is destroyed afterwards for his heresy.

(Thus, the President and Nitze exchanged positions, from their initial reactions to their final views; yet Nitze's final view--the President's initial one, the missiles must go without a public trade, by military pressure, as much as necessary--remained relevant to the President. McNamara thinks JFK could not have gone for the public trade, after initially defining the situation as he did; thinks he would have kept up pressure of blockade (193), lest he risk "impeachment". (The pressure from the military and civilian hawks would have threatened near-revolt; see my own emotional reaction, and that of Dillon retrospectively, 171). Yet, in deprecating the chance that he would have moved to invade, is McNamara reconsidering his impression of the time in light of the information that RFK may have, as he says, delivered an ultimatum? Would that not have influenced the President, even if he had not authorised such language, as McNamara speculates? And what if more recon planes had been shot down, as the blockade was tightened?

Would the public really have reacted that badly, after the tension of the crisis? See the public relief when Unconditional Surrender was abandoned (after Hiroshima), despite White House apprehension. And the happiness that we were out of Vietnam, both in October 1972, March 1973 and May 1975, after a generation of apprehension about this. (with no "morning after" for Ford).

Thus, where the destruction of the Northern Hemisphere can be averted only by the abandonment of the ruling paradigm, bet on the destruction of the Hemisphere.

7. I suspect that when Kennedy apologists (Kennedy School political scientists) hear me pursue, critically, Kennedy's prolongation of the risks of a confrontation he should never have launched, they feel impatient, put upon, sense that I am stretching perversely to be critical and dismissive.

After all, I sense they feel, look at the criticisms Kennedy's policy gets from the Right (about which, I suspect, their feelings and their responses are different). Don't these cancel out, or invalidate, the criticisms that are raised from the left, from the doves?

Isn't it clear that his position was centrist, moderate: that he used his power, creditably, to resist powerful pressures to act more violently, dangerously, that others in his position would probably have been more precipitate and less successful, that he chose goals as modest and means as prudent as he could "afford"--without risking impeachment? (This may have been his own assessment, as expressed to his brother).

This response--if I am not just imagining it--reflects a half-conscious assessment that the views of the Right, the hawks, require to be taken specially seriously as a political factor, by Presidents and by observers. This is not because "the truth," or appropriate policy, generally lies somewhere midway between the views of Left and Right; but because the Right is powerful disproportionately to its numbers: well-financed, strongly represented (if a minority) in the media and the Establishment, and with a strong institutional base within the government itself, in particular in the military and perhaps in the operational wing of the intelligence community.

Thus their views are weightier, politically, than the legalistic or moralistic or "radical" objections to policy that may be raised by "liberals" (now seen as "the left", with genuine radicals an almost-unheard fringe) or even the fears and frustrations of the mass public. Supporters of the Presidency or of particular Presidents are likely to give them great credit--to feel, really, that they deserve immunity from "liberal/left" criticism--because of the courage they have shown in resisting the precise, extreme demands and policy recommendations of the military and the Right. The Presidents themselves and their close advisors commonly feel--for the rest of their lives--that such criticism is misguided, ethically irrelevant, unfair, for this reason.

There is even some truth to this judgment. Yet it accepts too quickly that a course which is significantly less dangerous or brutal or lawless than that advocated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff or certain "hardnosed" civilians is, by the same token, "moderate" in the sense of adequately wise, prudent, moral, safe: when it may be only a slightly less precipitous road to hell. (See my Note on the Restrained Race to Oblivion).

To praise as "moderate, cautious" the simple rejection of certain extreme, radical militarist courses that should scarcely be regarded as legitimate policy "options"--proposals that ought to disbar their advocates from any further participation in serious policymaking--is to collaborate in the dismissal of all moral, legal, and constitutional restraints from consideration in high-level national security policymaking.

The common rejection of such proposals--not, unfortunately, all of them--by Presidents should not exempt them or their advisors from critical scrutiny of the "compromises" they adopt instead. (Though it is also true that such criticism should take account of the actual pressures they were experiencing to do even worse than they did; nor should it be based on the naive presumption that others in their place would with high likelihood have responded to such pressures better, simply because the circumstances "demanded" it).

8. Some "ironies," bases for regret (in some cases, shame), in my own career (comparable, in the shameful cases, to the "irony" that Burlatsky, who now reveals that changing the strategic balance was perhaps the main objective of the missile deployment, was the drafter of Khrushchev's speech of December 1962 to the Supreme Soviet which declared that defending Cuba was the sole and only purpose; or in the ironic cases, comparable to the fact that Khrushchev, in attempting to defend Cuba, justified and almost brought on an invasion of Cuba, or that Kennedy, concerned that the deployment of missiles might lead to the loss of Berlin, planned and threatened and almost carried out measures that, he himself thought, might well have led to Soviet takeover of Berlin):

--My BNSP turned out to have been a first-strike plan (given the non-existence of Soviet first-strike forces); and it became the basis for Nitze's model for the Soviet FS-strike plan, the core of his "window of vulnerability", which rationalised a vast and destabilizing buildup of US first-strike forces while rejecting arms control negotiations; and it was the basis for Weinberger's protracted war plans.

--My last draft of the Ann Arbor speech (which I did advise against strongly) was a political and diplomatic disaster, helped push the French out of the Alliance and encourage them to veto the UK from the Common Market.

--My Gilpatric speech did end the Berlin Crisis in 1961, but helped drive Khrushchev toward the Cuban Missile Crisis, both in its substantive political import and, probably (I never thought of this before, in humiliating and enraging Khrushchev and perhaps Malinovsky, who later participated in the deployment decision).

--The Kennedy defense speech I proposed in 1959 led toward the conventional buildup that permitted the threats in the Cuban Crisis and, more importantly, Vietnam.

--I drafted a speech (not given, and I didn't believe in it) that cynically explained our open-ended involvement as the containment of China; I collaborated on a policy that I didn't agree with, that was the irreversible step toward catastrophe.

--I helped McNamara with a rationale to persuade the President to start Rolling Thunder after Qui Nhon, a policy I thought morally and practically disastrous. McNamara was successful, and I was right.

--I had, on the other hand, the greatest resistance--yet I cooperated, on request, though so inefficiently that I was bypassed--to Kennedy's prudent decision to defuse the Turkish

missiles and prepare to remove them, to avert escalation in Cuba II.

8. More on why there was a crisis, and what its risks were.

Was the Soviet secrecy and deceit critical to the US crisis reaction? Bundy and Sorensen suggest yes, though the Soviets seem not to have considered this strongly. But surely an open announcement of a Soviet decision to deploy missiles, at the request of the Cubans, might have led, still, to a US decision to blockade, and perhaps even to threaten airstrike or invasion: as the US has been saying for years about the prospect of Soviet Migs in Nicaragua, with almost no internal criticism of these threats.

This latter policy suggests that the same steps might well have been taken even against Soviet short-range nuclear weapons, or a small and limited number of MRBMs. After all, Nixon--who had just been narrowly defeated for President, and was running for governor of California--was recommending a blockade at the time against Soviet defensive non-nuclear weapons.

By what right would we do this? We would say, the Monroe Doctrine: but that would raise the whole question of our attitude to postwar "spheres of influence." Our "traditional, special relation to Cuba and the Caribbean"? That really refers to the Platt Amendment, which precisely expresses our preferred relationship to Cuba, and its very limited sovereignty. (It is, indeed, like the Soviet Union's relation to Finland, an analogy on which Bundy actually relied.)

But had this changed in 1959, or not? Did Cuba have the right to change it: to claim full independence, with all rights of sovereignty, including defensive alliances and trading partners of its own choice? Or not? Did the US accept this change as legitimate, permanent, irreversible by US violent means, covert or overt? No, it did not (in secret): none of those.

The refusal to recognize a permanent or legitimate change in relationship was not limited to the White House; it was widely held by Republicans, Congress and the public (comparably to feelings about Panama, and perhaps--we shall soon see--the Philippines).

Thus, the Soviets and Cubans were acting a little soon to consolidate an unwanted and resisted change in a "traditional" hierarchical (imperial) relationship, in a particularly dramatic and provocative way. But (unknown to the US public) they didn't have time to wait, if they were to avert possible success a

violent counterrevolutionary and counter-independence US rollback campaign.

Kennedy may not have had a definite intent, determination, to invade if necessary, or to have made such a decision. But far from ruling out such a course--as most Americans would have supposed, before the Bay of Pigs and again, after its failure--he had directed high-level preparation for quick implementation of such a decision if he were to come to it, precisely for the fall of 1962 (as Khrushchev feared, perhaps exaggerating its inevitability).

And the possibility that he would come to it, because success of his larger intention depended on it, was foreseen by Taylor, soon to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, in May, 1962 (about the time Khrushchev decided on his deterrent move).

What Kennedy had decided--in great secrecy from the American public, which would have been astounded to know it after the Bay of Pigs--was to accomplish the overthrow of the Castro regime, if possible by a vast covert campaign. And US intervention was by no means ruled out, if necessary--as the planners assumed with near certainty that it would be (just as they expected US intervention to be necessary to achieve Presidential goals in Vietnam, from 1961 on)--though the President was (perhaps) not committed to this further step.

To say, as McNamara did in Cambridge, that the US had no plan to invade--in the sense of a contingency plan, up to date and with full preparations to implement on Presidential order--is simply false. To say, as he then modified his position, that there was no intent--suggesting that there was a definite intent not to carry out such a plan (as may have been true, in his own mind at least, with respect to first-use nuclear planning)--is also untrue or misleading. What might be more correct would be to say: No intent to do it unless necessary--unless Mongoose proved inadequate without it (which was almost certain)--and perhaps not, perhaps even probably not, even then.

9. Suppose the Soviets had taken comparable measures to resist the deployment of US missiles to Turkey--in the same year, 1962, when these were deployed! Blockade, if feasible; threats or implementation of air attack (like the Israeli raid on Iraq, or what Kennedy first envisioned for Cuba); invasion.

The only difference would be the lack of a "traditional" hierarchical relation to Turkey: which the US did not rely on in its public rationale or in the UN! And suppose, despite that absence, the Soviets claimed--perhaps quite sincerely--a wholly comparable outrage at this presumption by the other superpower and the nature of the "defenses" its neighbor was presuming to install on its borders. (After all, Turkey could hardly claim to

feel a need for defense or deterrence comparable to what Cuba could, after the Bay of Pigs, even in the absence of public knowledge of Mongoose).

Why did this not happen? Was it not, in combination:
 a) This is really outrageously illegal, in the postwar, UN Charter era, an assertion of sphere of influence Great Power claims that are supposed to be outmoded, a unilateral military assertion of might. (Unless the country in question could plausibly claim its security was sharply and immediately threatened, a supreme national emergency; but this would imply a belief either that one would immediately be attacked--which neither power claimed--or that it would be the basis for prompt aggression elsewhere in the world. The US did hint at this--and perhaps believed it with respect to Berlin (the strongest case for the Kennedy policy, somewhat encouraged by Soviet hints in 1962 and the ultimatum of 1961)--but on what basis?)

How, after all, was the balance of power to be changed? 48 missiles would make only a marginal difference: looking not just at overall numbers but at capabilities (even though it was a large proportional difference in capability; the Soviet capability started so close to zero).

But a much larger number of missiles, which was physically possible in a short time, would have made a major difference. Not in Soviet second-strike capability; the missiles in Cuba would have been highly vulnerable. But they would have had, for the first time (and last time!) a good first-strike capability, comparable to ours. Our second-strike capability (in submarines) would have remained large, much larger than the Soviets'; still, there would have been a rough equality in first-strike, damage-limiting capability (enough for each side to have a real incentive to strike first if it anticipated a high likelihood of being struck soon). This would be a situation unstable in crises, to a degree never since achieved (but which might come into existence, for the first time, in the late 90's, with SDI as well as D5, ASW, and barrage capability against mobile missiles).

In 1962, such a situation would have been sharply, relatively, inhibiting to the credibility of US first-use nuclear threats, in Europe (as over Berlin) or elsewhere. This would be in addition to its deterrent effect--primarily by the threat of unauthorised local initiation under attack--to invasion or attack on Cuba.

Moreover, it would symbolise the arrival of true military parity, underpinning the ability of the Soviets to use such menacing means to consolidate a change, a setback, in US imperial relationships.

What the Soviet move could have meant (on a large scale) was not, as Collingwood said in 1962 (B/W 22), the ability to neutralize US retaliatory ability to destroy the Soviets, but enough damage-limiting capability to make a Soviet preemptive (not preventive) strike credible, if the US gave the Soviets reason to fear they were about to be struck. This would newly inhibit US escalation of a "limited" nuclear war; hence, it would inhibit US first-use, since without a credible US threat to escalate in response to Soviet retaliatory second-use, the first-use would appear too likely to lead to an ineffective, highly dangerous and destructive mutual exchange (even if it might remain limited to a localized region).

What would be threatened, in the first instance, would be US domination ("protection") of its extended, global sphere of influence and its commercial and strategic interests therein, insofar as these rested on US threats to initiate nuclear war: not, immediately (or perhaps at all) the physical security of the US homeland.

US Type I deterrence against preventive, surprise attack would not be significantly threatened (we had too much of a surplus of deterrent power for that). But US extended deterrence, insofar as it threatened first-use, would be curtailed. (This might have been serious, even immediately, over Berlin; the Kennedy Administration had real fears of this; and Khrushchev certainly fed those fears in the fall of 1962. Why did he? Perhaps--counterproductively!--to deter any thought of attack on the missiles after they were in place and operational, by hinting at horizontal escalation against Berlin in case of attack. But that heightened Kennedy's determination to prevent them from becoming operational: even though he does seem to realize that doing this might lead itself to the loss of Berlin.

There is something of a paradox here; it might be resolved by inferring that, as he saw it, a Soviet move against Berlin--which he thought almost certain if he attacked the missiles--would not necessarily be successful if it came in the absence of the new deployments, and might be wholly averted if he got the missiles out by threats and blockade without an attack; whereas if he accepted the missiles, he would then get the blockade of Berlin and it would then be successful for the Soviets.

This suggests that Khrushchev would have been wise not to hint explicitly--rather, the reverse--that pressure on Berlin was to be expected after the November elections (i.e., as Kennedy understood these hints after October 16, as soon as the missiles were operational. Maybe better, oblique assurances that there would never again be pressure on Berlin unless there were an attack on a Soviet ally, or perhaps more specifically, on Cuba: though this is a bit more explicit about horizontal escalation than either power allowed itself to be.

Ask the Soviets: What was the import of the frequently-repeated assurances Berlin would not be a subject of public controversy "or pressure" until after the elections? This was a puzzling "reassurance" to all the American listeners, who pointed out that they could expect no thanks for this considerateness, that if they were going to make trouble for us it didn't make much difference whether it was before or after the elections.

My hypothesis in 1964 may still apply: That Khrushchev hoped and counted on the missiles not being discovered till they were operational, in late October or early November (about the time of the elections); but that, in case they were discovered while they were going in, he wanted to minimize the pressure on Kennedy to attack or invade. If Khrushchev had announced the missiles openly beforehand or while they were going in--which Kennedy feared he would do (it was to avoid this that no warning was given after October 16 and no questions were asked of Gromyko)--then right-wing and mass pressures would have been intense on Kennedy to attack or invade immediately, especially just before this election in which Cuba had already become an issue. Indeed, if Kennedy had expected Khrushchev to announce the missiles during the campaign, he might have felt compelled to preempt, both with his own announcement and with an attack.

By keeping silent to the public (and ambiguous to Kennedy, so as not to risk leaks, or to force Kennedy to acknowledge the warning or risk exposure later, he permitted Kennedy the option of keeping silent himself about any evidence he might discover--explaining later, if necessary, that it wasn't "hard" enough--till after the election, by which time the missiles were to be operational, effectively deterring attack even if public pressures should then commence.

The references to Berlin and the elections could then have had two meanings, both serving this aim: a) As an oblique, coded reference to Cuba: "We won't give you trouble anywhere...in the form of a public announcement that will generate unwanted pressures on you during the campaign (if you don't announce the missiles yourself" (this coding would be necessary so as not to announce the missile deployment in case Kennedy did not discover it, and also, in case Kennedy did know, to protect him from an obligation to tell the public the announcement he had received or risk an embarrassing exposure afterwards: if Kennedy faced this choice, he would be tempted to preempt domestic pressure or criticism by attacking);

(b) A warning: "If you do choose to attack Cuba before the election, you should expect a new Berlin crisis as well, also before the election." In some cases this warning was almost this explicit. Since the Soviets were openly claiming to fear a US attack on Cuba--which was being openly called for by both

Republicans and some Democrats--this would not seem gratuitous even if Kennedy knew nothing about the missiles. But if he should discover them, and feel pressed to attack for domestic reasons, or feel that the missiles gave him a perfect excuse for an attack he wanted anyway, he should then recall these warnings and reflect that he could not get away with a Cuban invasion or attack alone: he must also contemplate a Berlin crisis at the same time, also before the election. Khrushchev might have hoped this would slow him up: that it would seem too much to handle before an election. (See Rostow's memo on Khrushchev's interpretation of the 1960 election).

(I thought then that the timing was set precisely to take advantage of the elections, in the way to be described; but it now seems possible that Khrushchev was anticipating an invasion sometime in the fall, and was moving as fast as possible to head it off).